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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes the three substantive reports on ability grouping described in TM 000 501-503. It lists the characteristics of ability grouping as practised in American school systems. Extensive conclusions and recommendations, generally unfavorable to ability grouping are given. Alternative educational strategies for improvement of instruction are recommended. (PR)

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Ability Grouping: 1970

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

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FOREWORD

In December 1969, a task force was organized for the purpose of advising on the scope and organization of a series of reports regarding ability grouping in the public schools of the United States. Those involved in the planning included:

Warren G. Findley, Principal Investigator

Miriam M. Bryan	Edmund W. Gordon
Paul I. Clifford	Roger T. Lennon
John E. Dobbin	A. John Stauffer
Gordon Foster	Ralph W. Tyler

The Office of Education and the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare were represented by Peter Briggs, Christopher Hagen, and Rosa D. Wiener.

Four documents were planned and have now been completed.

I. Common Practices in the Use of Tests for Grouping Students in Public Schools.

II. The Impact of Ability Grouping of School Achievement, Affective Development, Ethnic Separation, and Socio-economic Separation.

III. Problems and Utilities Involved in the Use of Tests for Grouping Children with Limited Backgrounds, and Alternative Strategies to Such Grouping.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Mrs. Bryan prepared Document I, based on questionnaire responses from schoolmen and supplementary data from Miss Wiener. Dr. Clifford and Mr. Dominick Esposito prepared the basic content of Document II, which was then edited by Mrs. Bryan. Contributions to Document III were secured from Mrs. Bryan, Mr. Dobbin, Dr. Findley, Mrs. Blythe Mitchell, and Dr. Stauffer. The summary and conclusions were prepared by Dr. Findley.

The work presented herein was performed pursuant to a grant from the U. S. Office of Education, Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U. S. Office of Education, and no official endorsement by the U. S. Office of Education should be inferred.

Additional copies of the four documents are available upon request. Write:

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ABILITY GROUPING - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS*

Introduction

This document is a summary in non-technical language of related information in the supporting documents. It summarizes them in a sequential series of statements that follow. If these are read in sequence, they form a logical argument or brief in support of the recommendations.

A few preliminary statements will help make the meaning of the conclusions clearer. Conclusions are to be read in the light of the general notion that effects are more favorable or less damaging as one progresses from situation D1 to situation D4 defined below.

Preliminary Statements

A. As used here, ability grouping is the practice of organizing classroom groups in a graded school to put together children of a given age and grade who have most nearly the same standing on measures or judgments of learning achievement or capability.

B. Grouping and regrouping within a classroom for instruction in particular subjects is an accepted and commended instructional practice. It is not to be considered ability grouping in the sense in which that term is used here.

C. Ability grouping may be based on a single test, on teacher judgment, or on a composite of several tests and/or judgments.

D. Ability grouping in a school district may take one of several forms, but chiefly one of four varieties:

1. Ability grouping of children in all school activities on the same basis.

2. Ability grouping for all learning of basic skills and knowledge on the same basis, but association with the generality of children of the same age in physical education and recreation.

3. Ability grouping for learning of basic academic skills and knowledge on the same basis, but association with the generality of children of the same grade in less academic activities, including physical education, art, music, and dramatics.

4. Ability grouping for learning of individual subjects or related subjects on different bases related to progress in mastering different areas (for example, language arts vs. mathematics), but association with the generality of children of the same grade in non-academic areas. This has sometimes been referred to as "achievement grouping."

* Prepared from contents of Documents I-III by Dr. Warren G. Findley

E. Ability grouping in the first grades, usually the first six or eight grades, is generally by assignment to single classroom teachers for instruction in most subjects.

F. Ability grouping in the last grades, usually in junior and senior high school, is generally by assignment within programs of study (college preparatory, commercial, vocational, general).

G. At high school, assignment to a curriculum or program of study may be made a part of a total ability grouping program. On the other hand, ability grouping is often accomplished to a degree by a process of self-selection in which individual students choose their programs of study freely or with some regard to prerequisites. In essential respects, the difference between the two methods is analogous to the distinction between de jure and de facto segregation.

H. Ability grouping practices differ in the degree to which reclassification or reassignment is provided for. Practices vary from virtually no review to systematic review at specified intervals of years or more often.

I. Ability grouping may be limited to provision for extreme groups.

J. Special education for mentally retarded children is to be distinguished from general ability grouping, but needs to be considered a special case subject to examination and report here.

K. Provision of advanced subjects for limited numbers of superior students is to be distinguished from ability grouping applied to all students of a grade group, but needs to be considered a special case subject to examination and report here.

Conclusions

1. Ability grouping is widely practiced in American school systems.

2. Ability grouping is especially characteristic of larger school systems.

3. Ability grouping is more common in higher grades than in earlier grades.

4. Homogeneous grouping by ability across the subjects of the school curriculum is impossible. Groups homogeneous in one field or sub-field will prove heterogeneous in other fields. Thus, children grouped by reading score or "intelligence" will overlap considerably in mathematics achievement.

5. Ability grouping is widely approved by school teachers and administrators.

6. Although unqualified approval of ability grouping is widespread among teachers, disproportionate numbers express preference for teaching mixed, average, or superior classroom groups over teaching lower-achieving groups.

7. Substantial educational research on streaming (homogeneous grouping) in England's schools indicates that the most detrimental effect is caused by assigning "prostreaming" teachers to "non-streamed" classes. The generalization also applies to American schools.

8. Socioeconomic and social class differences are increased by streaming, reduced by non-streaming.

9. Virtually all ability grouping plans depend on tests of aptitude or achievement as an integral feature.

10. Ability grouping, as practiced, produces conflicting evidence of usefulness in promoting improved scholastic achievement in superior groups, and almost uniformly unfavorable evidence for promoting scholastic achievement in average or low-achieving groups. Put another way, some studies offer positive evidence of effectiveness of ability grouping in promoting scholastic achievement in high-achieving groups; studies seldom show improved achievement in average or low-achieving groups.

11. The effect of ability grouping on the affective development of children is to reinforce (inflate?) favorable self-concepts of those assigned to high achievement groups, but also to reinforce unfavorable self-concepts in those assigned to low achievement groups.

12. Low self-concept operates against motivation for scholastic achievement in all individuals, but especially among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority groups.

13. Children from unfavorable socioeconomic backgrounds tend to score lower on tests and to be judged less accomplished by teachers than children from middle-class homes. This discrepancy is more marked as children grow older and approach adulthood.

14. The effect of grouping procedures is generally to put low achievers of all sorts together and deprive them of the stimulation of middle-class children as learning models and helpers.

15. Low achievers include many disruptive children who have failed to acquire constructive school attitudes as well as children with low and slow achievement patterns.

16. Children of many minority groups (Negro, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, Indian American) come disproportionately from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

17. The source of disadvantage for some minority groups (Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, Indian American) derives in part from the fact that teaching and testing in schools are usually entirely in English, which for them is a "second" language.

18. The language patterns of black and white children from lower socio-economic backgrounds often differ so markedly from "standard American" as to make schooling in most schools involve language disability by such language standards. This circumstance has not only the direct effect of making learning more difficult. Indirect effects are also produced via lowered self-concept because of frequent corrections.

19. A fundamental generalization is that differences in socioeconomic backgrounds result in cumulative effects because of early acquired differences in ability to interact profitably with teachers who have middle-class habits and values. Middle-class children come to school prepared to respond to approval by teachers for their prior learning and readiness to respond. Disadvantaged children, especially boys, often have to unlearn assertive, unresponsive behavior in order to participate in a teaching-learning rapport in the classroom.

20. Desegregated classes have greatest positive impact on school learning of socioeconomically disadvantaged children when the proportion of middle-class children in the group is highest. Conversely, when socioeconomically disadvantaged children are in the majority in a class, the effect of grouping is commonly to produce poorer achievement on their part.

21. Assignment to low achievement groups carries a stigma that is generally more debilitating than relatively poor achievement in heterogeneous groups.

22. A positive dynamic of all instructional programs is constructive stimulation, what Hunt calls "the problem of the match"--some stimulation, but not too much, accompanied by supportive encouragement.

23. Formal education, or instruction, makes a differences in ultimate adult capability. How much difference education makes in comparison with other factors is a separate question which is essentially irrelevant.

24. Ability grouping practices are to be distinguished from each other in terms of their underlying strategies for dealing with initial differences among children and the cumulative effect of such differences.

25. Different ability grouping practices show differemt amounts of differential treatment given to different children after ability grouping has been done. The teaching strategies employed with those classified low often deny stimulation offered to those classified high on the criterion used in grouping. Elsewhere, all those classified in one group are thereafter taught as if almost identical in capability.

26. Of the patterns of ability grouping differentiated in Preliminary Statement D, type D4 generally involves more detailed diagnosis and specific instructional differentiation.

27. There are viable alternatives to ability grouping as means of furthering school learning, including stratified heterogeneous grouping, tutoring, team teaching, and individually programed instruction.

28. Planned heterogeneous grouping--notably the Baltimore plan of stratified heterogeneous grouping by tens--takes into account simulataneously the concern for curtailing extreme heterogeneity, while assuring enough diversity to give leadership opportunities in each class, providing thereby for stimulation of the less advanced by these leaders, and avoiding the concentration of defeated and stigmatized children in a bottom group almost impossible to inspire or teach.

29. Where older children, themselves academically retarded, are paid to tutor younger children who are having difficulty in learning reading in the elementary grades, both groups gain substantially. In fact, the older children gain even more than the younger ones being tutored. Similar findings apply to writing.

30. Teaching by teams of teachers with different responsibilities, under the leadership of coordinating master teachers, is a fundamental pattern in plans developed for training future elementary school teachers. Departmentalization of instruction may be considered a step in this direction.

31. Individualized instruction by prescription of sequences of learning experiences has been worked out for much of the learning of basic skills and structured knowledge.

32. All four of the above teaching-learning practices can be applied simultaneously. They are mutually compatible.

33. Early childhood education, whether designed to be compensatory or for all children, presents a further supplementary approach.

34. Residential segregation, in the form of concentrations of minority group in cities and the moving of majority groups to suburbs, plus the organization of private schools along ethnic lines, makes ethnic desegregation within many large cities almost meaningless.

35. The same may be said to a lesser degree of socioeconomic segregation without regard to ethnic distinctions.

36. Ability grouping (of the types described in Preliminary Statements D1 - D3) has generally undesirable effects on learning and self-concept within like ethnic and socioeconomic groups, which are magnified when the correlated factors of ethnicity and socioeconomic status are involved.

37. Findings of the impact of ability grouping on classroom groups have implications for residential segregation and schooling tied to it. The issues underlying ability grouping and school desegregation are deeply embedded in our society and its culture. The matters reported here are integral parts of a larger social pattern, contributing to the perpetuation or change of that pattern, but largely determined by it.

Recommendations

1. Ability grouping of the types described in Preliminary Statements D1, D2, and D3 should not be used.

2. Ability grouping of the types described in Preliminary Statement D4 may be used to advantage where the information gained by testing and/or observation is the first step in a program of diagnosis and individualized instruction.

3. Provision should be made for frequent review of each individual's grouping status as part of the instructional program.

4. Tutoring, team teaching, individually programed instruction, and early childhood education should be explored and exploited for their usefulness in promoting learning.

5. The personality dynamics of the tutoring of younger children by older children, often of modest ability, should be explored and exploited.

6. Heterogeneous grouping, in a classroom atmosphere of cooperation and helping, should be the rule except as indicated under Recommendation 2.

7. Stratified heterogeneous grouping by tens, as practiced in Baltimore, should be utilized and refined.

8. Favorable self-concept should be a goal in itself, but it is also a supportive factor in learning. An attitude of firm confidence and hope by the teacher is fundamental. Techniques for conveying such an attitude can be learned.

9. Teacher training should include an emphasis on welcoming diversity in children, and teaching children to prize it in each other. A particularly important aspect of such diversity is with regard to language and customs of minority groups. Teachers therefore need pre-service and/or in-service preparation in language habits and cultural heritages of minority groups to use as the basis for positive acceptance of all kinds of children into the classroom group.

10. Steps should be taken <u>as early as possible</u> in each local situation to promote unitary school populations in each district and each classroom. When a district or city has become almost completely a socioeconomically limited population, the possibility of effective desegregation and its constructive impact virtually disappears.